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ABSTRACT

Students who visit writing labs are often inexperienced writers who need help and even prescriptive teaching. Although some compositionists are leery of including prescriptive help among possible teaching strategies, the writing lab tutor's position as advisor rather than judge helps students accept the suggestions as the options they are. As writers become more experienced, they are encouraged to reject lab models for methods they develop over time. A tutor used collaborative questioning and modeling to help one student learn how to paraphrase and synthesize to keep from plagiarizing. Another student who felt completely unprepared for the kind of writing she was asked to do was able to complete her paper after the tutor used a combination of questioning and writing samples. Students' factual errors bring up another issue faced in writing labs. Good tutors can be alert to inconsistencies and problems, and they are in a position to help students learn the importance of accuracy and of careful reading in every discipline. Prescriptive teaching methods, if used cautiously, will not kill students' creativity, nor will they inflate grades. With training and experience, the effective writing lab tutor knows when to intervene and when to get out of the student's way. (Contains 10 references.) (RS)

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Prescriptive Teaching: An Rx for the Writing Lab

Kathleen Conway

Molloy College

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When "Reality Bites" the Writing Instructor:

Going Beyond "Just Teaching" and "Just Writing"

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Kathleen Conway, Molloy College, Rockville Centre, New York

Prescriptive Teaching: An Rx for the Writing Lab

Recent literature about writing instruction emphasizes the student as an independent maker of meaning. This student always seems to have the information to make this meaning, if only we teachers and tutors can come up with the right questions or prompts to get her started or to encourage her to rewrite. She may occasionally need a little collaboration, but this kind of help must be limited because we don't want to interfere with her own authentic creation. If she gets stuck at a particular point in the process, we model that activity, brainstorming, writing or revising with her. At no point do we suggest a particular change, correct errors or recommend a method of organization. After all, correcting and recommending suggest the existence of the dreaded "ideal text." To arrive at the meaning trapped inside her, waiting to be freed by a well-phrased question, this mythical student is willing to invest an infinite amount of time in conversation and revisions.

I am sure this mythical student really does exist, but she rarely visits the writing lab where I spend twenty-four hours each week. My students are intelligent human beings with many ideas. But many of them are also the "inexperienced writers" (227) Mina Shaughnessy described. And as inexperienced writers, they need help and, yes, even direction, and they need it yesterday. So in working with them, I make occasional suggestions about the writing process and even the product. These prescriptives do not seem constraining to students who arrive looking for a definite way to approach a writing problem. In fact, they are more like the "enabling constraints" discussed by Judith and Geoffrey Summerfield. The Summerfields write that they "have no objection to arbitrary constraints ('Do this because I say so') as long as the

doing . . . bear[s] fruit *that the students themselves can value"* (7). Sometimes understanding the rules of a discourse community and realizing that they can write within those rules help students to get their thoughts on paper.

While compositionists such as Muriel Harris and Stephen M. North acknowledge the need for flexibility, they are leery of including prescriptive help among possible teaching strategies. So, for example, North maintains that in the writing center "the object of . . . interaction is to intervene in and ultimately alter the composing process of the writer" (28). But North does not feel enough evidence exists to determine which methods the tutor should use. And while Muriel Harris advocates "the notion of a grab bag, [which] . . . implies that all of us can select what looks useful for ourselves and switch from one strategy to another when the first one doesn't work," she also explains that in her writing lab "tutors are discouraged from making . . . directive comments." ("Collaboration" 376-77). Perhaps this reluctance to sanction prescriptives stems from the theorists' familiarity with teachers who prescribed about writing until it seemed no more creative than washing a pair of socks. But the writing lab tutor's position as advisor rather than judge helps students accept her suggestions as the options they are. As writers become more experienced, they are encouraged to reject lab models for methods they develop over time.

Of course, this willingness to prescribe for writers does not mean that students can come to the lab to have a paper "fixed," while they passively watch. The writing lab is not a repair shop where broken papers get miraculously mended, without any sweat on the part of the student. The writing lab **is** a learning resource, a room full of teachers who have time, training, and inclination to guide students in improving their own writing processes. And we must allow

these teachers to choose from a full range of strategies so they can effectively deal with any tutoring situation. These strategies include the now orthodox method of questioning to help students arrive at their own meanings, recommended by C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon (44); the use of exercises which are geared to build particular cognitive skills, mentioned by Karen I. Spear (69); the use of modeling, extolled by Harris (Teaching One-to-One 67); and even the teaching of specific content or form that the writer can incorporate in his text or writing process. While these last two strategies might raise eyebrows, they are measures good teachers use frequently in the classroom and in conferences, and they should be available to the tutor. A sampling of situations which often occur in writing labs will show how necessary each strategy is.

Brandon has written an art paper in two parts. The first involves visiting an art museum and analyzing a painting. The second part calls for him to choose two movements in modern art and discuss their characteristics. Brandon expresses concern about the first part. The tutor reads this section, asking the student questions. For example, Brandon has written that the painting's subject, a naked man standing outside on a nasty day, seems to represent man against unkind nature. The tutor asks the student how he knew the day was nasty. And what gave him the impression that nature opposed the man? The student explains that the landscape behind the man was gray and that the light of the sun was weak and streaky. Also the man seemed to have a firm, straight posture, which made Brandon think he was consciously standing tall. The tutor suggests that the student include all these specifics in the analysis.

In this first half of the session, the tutor has used collaborative questioning, a technique Kenneth A. Bruffee sees as encouraging the writer to "justify beliefs to the satisfaction of other

people . . ." (9). Since the student has some thoughts or perceptions about his topic which he has not expressed, this questioning strategy works.

If the tutor is trying to remain within the comfortable precinct of agreed-upon theory, she is not so fortunate with the second half of the paper. The student states that this section needs only a check for mechanical errors. However, as the tutor reads, she notes a much more serious problem. For the student has essentially copied material out of two books, cutting and pasting sentences he found in these texts into his paper, with few comments of his own to connect them. He has not intended to plagiarize; he has parenthetically noted his sources and included a works cited page, although he has used no quotation marks. A moment's conversation reveals that he does not know how to paraphrase, and having little information about his subject, he has simply used the material as he found it. The student seems unable to begin synthesizing information from his sources in his own words without some instruction, so the tutor begins to model. Brandon uses the same process on another section of his writing. When he becomes stuck, she helps him continue. Finally, she suggests that he mark quotes he wants to use as is, placing quotes around those and connecting them with his own comments and with paraphrase. She checks several times as he works, pointing out places where the new material might be unclear to a reader, even suggesting a rephrasing when the writer appears stuck.

This modeling is effective. Brandon has started to paraphrase and synthesize by the end of the session. And as Harris notes, "Demonstrating or modeling is a recognized teaching technique with an extensive body of research to support its effectiveness" (Teaching One-to-One 67). But many theorists might think the tutor did too much *for* the student. For example, Knoblauch and Brannon stress the role that questioning can play and downplay the idea of

supplying directions: "The tutor should simply serve as a sounding board, offering the writer some strategic questions whose answers, which it is the writer's business to supply, may well enhance the coherence of his writing" (Knoblauch and Brannon 44). Harris seems less sure. While she often mentions the importance of questioning, she also recommends applying strategies to the student's own text, at least when correcting grammar errors: ". . . in the conference, teacher and student are working together on the student's own writing, thereby attending to the particular needs of that student and acknowledging his or her uniqueness" (Teaching One-to-One 132).

Modeling is effective and has a long history in teaching and learning. (Consider, for example, how you learned to tie your shoe.) So why do many theorists seem to dismiss it, preferring the more time consuming method of questioning in every case? I believe Irene Clark has captured the essence of the problem:

> Legitimate collaboration is primarily directed at developing the student's writing process. . . . With this aim in mind, tutors can, for instructional purposes, make or suggest changes in a text; however, they must make sure that the student's contribution remains predominant. (520)

This makes sense; perhaps what we are really worrying about is the ethics of collaboration, rather than its efficacy for learning. Harris comments "informed advice about all aspects of a student's writing [is applied] in order to help the writer become a better writer, not to fix [a] particular paper" ("Collaboration" 371). I agree; some students would be happy to let us rewrite their papers, but it is doubtful whether they would learn anything about writing if they served only as spectators.

Cecilia, a woman about thirty and my second student example, comes in to the lab in a state of panic. Like many students her age, she feels unprepared for the kind of writing she is doing now. She has been assigned a paper on The Book of Job as drama, but she has failed to make significant progress. With only a few more days to work on the assignment, and with kids and a job to juggle in addition to school, she states that she is ready to drop out. The tutor discovers through questioning and through reading her draft that she does not have a comprehensive definition of drama at her disposal. He suggests she look up drama in a literature text and see if the definition suggests parallels. The student comes back to the lab the next day with good material for the paper but with the complaint that she has no idea how to organize her report. She can envision how to write the body of the paper and in fact has begun to draw some parallels, but is not sure how to start or end her discussion. Nor does she respond when the tutor suggests that she just start right there in the lab or that she write the rest of the paper first and try the opening and conclusion later. The tutor then tries a more directive approach. He shows her a handout of sample openings and closings from student papers and suggests that she apply a few of the strategies in the samples to her work. The student cannot see the relationship at first, but after the tutor explains one strategy, she is able to adapt a few of the others herself. The woman leaves the lab with the handout in her hand. When she returns with the completed draft, she seems more relaxed and more confident about her ability to write and revise.

Here, the tutor really tries to avoid prescribing, but Cecilia is not ready to proceed on her own. Perhaps her anxiety stems from an overly prescriptive education earlier. She may, in fact, be locked into a process that she was taught, a process which encourages starting at the beginning and not writing paragraph two until one completes paragraph one. But whatever the

flaws in her earlier education, this woman, at this moment, is stuck, and she needs help now. The tutor's use of samples may seem too constraining to composition theorists. The samples do, of course, suggest a form; some, for example, include a thesis statement in the first paragraph or a restatement of the main point in the conclusion. In this example, however, the supplying of possible forms is not meant to mandate one direction but to suggest possible paths to someone lost in the woods. The combination of questioning and direction works well given Cecilia's time constraints and distress. Reframing questions until she could think of answers would only have resulted in further frustration.

Students' factual errors bring up another issue faced in writing labs. Should tutors point out errors when they see them or does that interfere with the finished product too much? What about errors in analysis? If a student reads a short story and misinterprets a pivotal scene, should the tutor mention it? These are thorny but important questions which get to the heart of the lab function. If we ignore factual errors and say that any interpretation is acceptable, we are left with a writing lab that does not deal with comprehension and conceptualizing but only with mechanical and formal concerns. The text a student produces will be improved as a result of a tutor's pointing out an inconsistency, but her understanding of the process of writing will also be developed. Good writers often ask a colleague to read a draft, checking whether the facts and analysis make sense; the student can learn to do the same. In addition, in rechecking a fact the student will learn that she must be critical of all information and ready to ask again if something she hears or reads about does not seem plausible. While no tutor can be expected to know the details of all the disciplines, good tutors can be alert to inconsistencies and problems. Writing lab faculty are in a position to help students learn the importance of accuracy and of careful

reading in every discipline. The tutor who says she will read for mechanics only is serving a very limited function. It is she who may eventually be replaced by software programs like Grammatik.

Where does all this talk of presciptives leave the university? Will it throw off our entire grading system and grant inflated grades for work which is not really students' own? The answer is *maybe, but*. Maybe visits to writing labs do result in higher grades. But even if a student does receive specific direction which raises a grade, he will also benefit from understanding and participating in the method used to revise texts. And student learning rather than maintenance of some preordained grade curve should be our goal in every college teaching situation. Most lab clients really want to become better writers. And since almost every tutorial results in more thinking or research or a further draft, lazy students just looking for an easy *A* rarely return more than once or twice.

A second question often asked is whether prescriptives will kill students' creativity, turning them instead into slavish followers of writing lab directions. And the answer is *no*--if the prescriptives are used cautiously. Even researchers convinced of the value of nondirective instruction realize that sometimes direction helps. For example, when analyzing teacher comments on student papers, Robert J. Connors and Andrea A. Lunsford pointed to one which gave rather explicit suggestions for revision and which their research assistants liked: "Some might complain that this teacher is being too directive, telling the student exactly how to revise, but after looking at many papers with no evidence that a revision option had ever existed and no evidence that the teacher cared much for the student or her situation, this kind of comment really captured our readers' attention." (216). In the writing lab, the directive comment works even

better since the student is free to accept it or reject it.

For the majority of students who want to become better writers and thinkers, the problem of directing their efforts without damaging their independence is best solved through realistic balance. With training and experience, the effective writing lab tutor knows when to intervene and when to get out of the student's way.

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